

The Philippine Insurgency: A Model for Iraq?

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The Philippine Insurgency: A Model for Iraq?  
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Submitted by Captain JC See  
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Over one-hundred years ago, the United States (U.S.) Army, outnumbered three to one, defeated an insurgency of at least eighty-thousand combatants, making the Philippine War "one of the most successful counterinsurgencies waged by a Western army in modern times."<sup>1</sup> Today in Iraq, the U.S. military is again involved in counterinsurgency operations with striking similarities to the Philippines War of 1899-1902. In both operations, the United States toppled a disagreeable government with swift military action and minimal casualties; the U.S. removed the existing governing system, in a country where self-rule was a foreign concept; and in both cases a rapid insurgency developed largely unnoticed.

While the Philippine War was resolved relatively swiftly, the United States is struggling to develop and implement an effective counterinsurgency strategy to defeat the Iraqi insurgency.<sup>2</sup> Scholars and military strategists alike have pointed to the aforementioned similarities and concluded that the Iraq War should be modeled from the successful strategy of the Philippine war of 1899-1902.<sup>3</sup> The complexity of the situation in

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1 Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 126-127. Boot states that the number of U.S. soldiers in the field averaged 24,000 during the Philippine War.

2 Timothy K. Deady, "Lessons from a successful counterinsurgency: the Philippines, 1899-1902," *Parameters*, Spring 2005, 53.

3 Vance Serchuk and Thomas Donnelly, "U.S. Counterinsurgency in Iraq: Lessons from the Philippine War," *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research Online*, 1 November, 2003, <[http://www.aei.org/publications/filter.,pubID.19408/pub\\_detail.asp](http://www.aei.org/publications/filter.,pubID.19408/pub_detail.asp)> (7 December, 2005).

Iraq deems this plan severely flawed, and potentially fraught with dangerous outcomes. The strategy to defeat the Iraqi insurgency should not be modeled on the successful strategy of U.S. Army during the 1899-1902 Philippine War due to inherent differences: population, culture, military capabilities.

### **Population**

The success of the U.S. Army in the Philippines was to a great extent due to the actions of the Filipino people and insurgents. In a classical insurgency, the leadership is critical to the strength of an insurgency. The Philippine insurgency was led by Emilio Aguinaldo, who had fought against colonial Spain prior to U.S. forces. In 1901, Aguinaldo was captured by U.S. forces and forced to proclaim acceptance of U.S. sovereignty. Additionally, he called on his forces to give up their struggle against the U.S.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Saddam Hussein called) on—and continues to encourage the Iraqi people from prison—the Iraqi military and general populace to fight and resist the U.S. invasion.

The people are also a key source of strength in a successful insurgency. Without the support of the populace, an insurgency is less likely to succeed. After several years of fighting and the surrender of Aguinaldo, Filipinos acquiesced to

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4 Boot, 125.

U.S. rule. Accustomed to centuries of rule by the Spanish, a majority of Filipinos rapidly became reconciled to U.S. rule.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to implementing guerilla style warfare, Aguinaldo initially attempted to fight the U.S. Army conventionally. When this proved to be unproductive, Aguinaldo transferred to guerilla warfare. However, the transition was a somewhat slow process, and the U.S. Army was quick to adapt to the tactics of the insurgents.

Conversely, in Iraq, Saddam Hussein waged a guerilla style war against the U.S. from the beginning.<sup>6</sup> Many of the regular and elite Iraqi Army units simply dispersed into the civilian population, reorganized, and initiated the insurgent campaign throughout the country. The Filipino insurgents turned to insurgency only when the U.S. Army could not be defeated conventionally while the Iraqi strategy was to defeat the U.S. Forces by inflicting minimal casualties over a long period of time and space.

### **Culture**

The Philippine insurgency, the Iraqi insurgency, and the U.S. Army then and now are all organizationally and culturally different. The Filipino insurgents lacked weapons and ammunition stockpiles. This served as a considerable hindrance for

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<sup>5</sup> Boot, 125.

<sup>6</sup> Certainly, the Iraqi Army attempted to confront Coalition Forces conventionally, but guerilla-style forces were trained and deployed when hostilities were initiated.

insurgent operations.<sup>7</sup> Being geographically isolated due to the insular, dispersed nature of the terrain and also to the thick jungle terrain, travel and supply of forces was difficult. Conversely, in Iraq, weapons and ammunition caches are prevalent throughout the country, allowing ample and distributed supplies. Iraqi insurgents are better armed than their Filipino counterparts.

The U.S. Army was well adapted and experienced at fighting irregular style warfare against Native Americans in the Western United States. This frontier fighting was very similar to the type of fighting soldiers saw in the Philippines. In contrast, mid and senior level officers currently in Iraq generally were trained under the Cold War mentality of conventional warfare.<sup>8</sup> Max Boot notes that twenty-six of thirty U.S. Army generals who served in the Philippines from 1898-1902 were veterans of the frontier Indian Wars.<sup>9</sup> While the U.S. Army that fought the Philippine insurgents were well trained and experienced for the type of fighting they experienced, U.S. forces today are predominantly trained in conventional force-on-force style warfare. The U.S. Army of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century would easily recognize the type of operations that are occurring in Iraq.

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7 Deady, 55.

8 Krepinevich, 5.

9 Boot, 127.

Anthony James Joes succinctly explains that the U.S. Army defeated the Filipino insurgents because "there were no screaming jets accidentally bombing helpless villages, no B-52s, no napalm, no artillery barrages, no collateral damage. Instead, the Americans conducted a decentralized war of small mobile units...hunting guerrillas who were increasingly isolated both by the indifference or hostility of much of the population and by the concentration of scattered peasant groups into larger settlements."<sup>10</sup> Modern equipment is functionally designed for implementation in conventional force-on-force engagements, not conventional force-on-insurgent operations.

In the Philippine War, the Filipino resistance to U.S. rule differed in character and ideology from island to island and province to province. Subsequently, the methods used by the U.S. Army varied just as broadly.<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to develop a comprehensive concept of operations for the Philippine War when the concepts varied from commander to commander in order to deal with the particular threat of a region or island.

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10 Anthony James Joes, *America and Guerrilla Warfare* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 325. Quoted in Robert M. Cassidy, "Back to the Street Without Joy: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam and Other Small Wars." *Parameters*, Summer 2004, 80.

11 Brian McAllister Linn, *The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899-1902* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), xi.

## Military Capabilities

Perhaps the most salient difference in the Philippine War and the current Iraq war is the degree of force employed. During the Philippine War, U.S. soldiers commonly utilized tactics more brutal than are acceptable by modern western standards. Max Boot notes that relative to the standard colonial practices at the time the U.S. soldiers' conduct was "better than average." However, these methods, which significantly contributed to the successes in pacifying the insurgents in the Philippine War, are considered brutal by modern standards.<sup>12</sup>

After an engagement in which a U.S. Marine company was ambushed by Filipino insurrectos, Marines "burned houses and huts along the road where they had been ambushed" and returned to their base.<sup>13</sup> While in Iraq civilian targets are not off-limits and are subject to be attacked based on the threat, the combat power utilize against these civilian targets is proportional to the threat, and must occur when the threat is physically present. Unlike the Philippines where U.S. Marines burned down those areas where they were ambushed despite the departure of enemy combatants, U.S. forces in Iraq are prevented

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12 Boot, 127. This is not a condemnation of the actions of U.S. soldiers in the Philippines, but rather a relative comparison to demonstrate that the methods used by U.S. soldiers in the Philippines are unacceptable by modern Western standards.

13 Hans Schmidt, *Maverick Marine: General Smedley D. Butler and the Contradictions of American Military History* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 12.



from carrying out acts of vengeance that are not tied to a specific tactical, strategic, or operational objective.

While during the Philippine conflict the U.S. Army employed many tactics that are now considered brutal, the U.S. military is being questioned by the international community about conventional methods of warfare that have long been the unquestioned standard. While white phosphorous is neither a chemical weapon nor banned, the use of white phosphorus in Iraq as a conventional incendiary weapon caused a significant outcry amongst international organizations.<sup>14</sup> The weapon is generally used to mark targets for destruction, and also as an incendiary device, both lawful methods of employment. Had this weapon been available to U.S. forces in the Philippines, it is unlikely that the U.S. populace would demonstrate a noticeable level of concern with its employment.

Technology and the media have also added a new dimension to the Iraq conflict that U.S. forces in the Philippines were not subjected. While the U.S. Army was generally viewed in a negative light by the media, the atrocities committed during the Philippine War were largely hidden from the media and accordingly the American public.<sup>15</sup> Quite the opposite is true in Iraq. During combat operations in Fallujah, Iraq in November,

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14 As reported by the BBC, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4440664.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4440664.stm)

15 Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 39.

2004, a U.S. Marine shot an enemy combatant, (who he determined to be a threat) pretending to be dead. The incident was captured on video, and a domestic and international media mêlée of outrage at the "brutality" of U.S. forces ensued.<sup>16</sup> Military operations in the Philippines were not under the same degree of scrutiny that U.S. forces today are in Iraq. Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Howze led aggressive patrols that ravaged the Philippine countryside, "killing and surrounding the guerillas, allowing them to die of hunger, and disease."<sup>17</sup> Such patrols today would likely result in dieing, hunger, and disease, ultimately undermining the strategic mission in Iraq. Similarly, intelligence operations in the Philippines were not dissected as they are in Iraq. In the Philippines, Brigadier General Frederick Funston ordered the family of a prominent guerrilla to be kidnapped in order to punish and coerce the guerilla to surrender.<sup>18</sup> In Iraq, combat operations are singularly focused on the insurgents and their support infrastructure; innocent friends and family are not harassed. The technological and media impacts on military capabilities and techniques are a significant difference between the conflicts in the Philippines and Iraq.

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16 <http://jurist.law.pitt.edu/paperchase/2004/11/military-investigating-possible.php>

17 Robert D. Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts*, (New York: Random House, 2005), 138.

18 Kaplan, 139.

Regardless of how it is obtained, military pacification of the insurgent groups is essential to a successful counterinsurgency. Brian Linn offers that the U.S. Army's successful strategy of non-military pacification of the Philippines was only possibly after the insurgents had been defeated or neutralized. An estimated 269,000 civilians and insurgents died as a result of the war. The poorly armed Filipino forces were crushed by a U.S. Army that, compared to modern U.S. forces in Iraq, knew few restraints.<sup>19</sup> A heavy-handed approach similar to the successful methods implemented in the Philippines is no longer acceptable in the west, and this limits the utility of the Philippine strategy.

### **Conclusion**

The complexities and uniqueness of how insurgencies organize and operate across time and space make the utilization of the Philippine model an inappropriate template for holistic application to the Iraqi operating environment. During the Philippine War, the Filipino insurgents were unable to defeat the U.S. Army because of their own military missteps. Additionally, the insurgent and military groups of both the Philippines and Iraq have unique complexities and cultures that contribute to how the conflicts are perceived and organized. This results in two distinct wars that must be fought

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<sup>19</sup> Linn, 170.

differently. Finally, modern U.S. forces are constrained in ways that U.S. forces during the period of the Philippine War were not. Subsequently a strategy of heavy-handed force cannot be employed in the Iraq War.

Small wars have changed dramatically over the last fifty years, and concomitantly so must the utilization of past strategies to defeat adversaries.<sup>20</sup> Mark Twain reportedly stated "history does not repeat itself, it rhymes." The same can be said for the Philippine War of 1899-1902 and the current Iraq War. Although there are superficial similarities that can be studied, the application of strategies used in previous conflicts should be meticulously analyzed and applied when conclusions drawn support their application. Like all insurgencies, Iraq poses a unique set of operational and tactical challenges that require unique solutions, not boilerplate approaches. There are striking strategic similarities for how the U.S. became involved in both wars and the motivations for involvement, but operationally and tactically, the wars cannot be conducted according to the same templates. A winning strategy from the Philippine war does not automatically equate to a winning strategy in Iraq.

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20 Thomas Hammes, "Dealing with Uncertainty," *Marine Corps Gazette*, November 2005, 37.

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